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Would you trust this woman with your country?

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As the beleaguered Syrian peace process has developed innovative attempts to involve women, it is timely to ask how women are included in high-level negotiations, and how this participation is received. Exclusion of women from high-level peace negotiations is nothing new, and, to mark the 15 year anniversary of the Women, Peace and Security agenda at the United Nations last year, has been frequently written about. Many pieces highlight the minimal or backstage inclusion of women participants at internationally-mediated talks to broker peace in [Syria](#) and [South Sudan](#), and there has been widespread condemnation of the marginalisation of women in decision-making processes, particularly as they are unreservedly [affected by](#) the consequences of war.

What is often less scrutinised, is the treatment of women who actually make it to a seat at the table, at negotiations which go beyond ending violence, and address the long-term consequences of secession, independence, and the pursuit of statehood. Are these women finally accepted as equals, treated with respect, and taken seriously as credible decision makers?

The Brussels-mediated normalization dialogue between the governments of Kosovo and Serbia has been marked from the outset by not only the presence of women, but by their integral participation, both as national delegates (Edita Tahiri), and as international mediators (the former European Union's foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, and her current successor, Federica Mogherini). This participation is in itself noteworthy, breaking what [Fionnula Ní Aoláin](#) calls the pattern of high-stakes diplomacy, 'where men negotiate and women take notes' in 'a highly masculine environment'.

However, for Jakup Krasniqi, former Kosovo Assembly Chairman and a leading member of the Initiative for Kosovo NISMA, the presence of women at this table appears to not only be problematic, but has embarrassed the nation. In a [post](#) on social media, he wrote,

"You can't say that the dialogue was balanced or soft, because the Serbian side was leading on toughness. The Kosovo side had a compromising dialogue with the Serbian side, while the Serbian side was developing a tough dialogue. They didn't give anything, they took everything! Why did this happen? It happened this way because the Kosovo Delegation, was a 'female' delegation, not only because it was led by a female, but because even when it was 'led' by 'the tough one,' no changes were noticeable either."

According to Krasniqi, the outcome of Kosovo's participation in the dialogue round was unsatisfactory for Kosovar Albanians, not only because the delegation was led by a woman negotiator, but because the delegation's performance was "female". His comments are more than

just a challenge to the presence of women at high-level talks; they challenge the entire performance of negotiating in terms of gender-based values, and negatively so.

From standpoints such as Krasniqi, women are welcome at the table, but only if they can behave like men, and be as masculine as the act of negotiation requires. He verbalises the fear that if you trust a woman with the status of your country, she might accidentally give it away through those natural characteristics of her sex: conciliation and weakness. He suggests that she could never stand up to those strong, uncompromising men on the other side of the table, and maybe this is why Kosovo doesn't have its own dialling code yet. Even when the 'tough one' has a go at bargaining, she is still unable to hold her ground against male opponents.

Krasniqi's comments were condemned by the Kosovo Women's Network (KWN), who demanded an apology and [declared](#) that "KWN considers it unacceptable to draw parallels between failures in negotiations and being a woman." However, his subsequent apology raises further issues, when he [claimed](#) that his comments were not about gender discrimination, but arose from a need to 'defend the honour of the country and the nation' – itself a concept that is gendered.

This faux apology is not uncommon when sexism or exclusion is called out for what it is, nor is the repetition or entrenchment of gender stereotypes through [public denial](#). The apology itself compounds the original insult in suggesting that concerned women simply did not understand, or have no real claim to adequate representation, or are oversensitive to demand parity and respect when they do have a seat at the table. In Krasniqi's case, he argued that he had no choice but to speak out in order to defend Kosovo's honour following its defeat at the hands of tough male negotiators, thus rescuing the country's reputation from the humiliating performance of its female representatives.

In a context where the outcomes of high-level political bargains are frequently publicised in terms of victory and defeat, often through comments by elite figures directed at their own ethnic voter base, this attempt to save face and even 'out bid' those in the negotiations by a more radical position is not unusual. What makes Krasniqi's comment stand out is that the scapegoat for defeat is framed in gendered terms: women, femininity, the enemy from within.

As [Monica McWilliams](#) stresses, insulting comments such as Krasniqi's are not diplomatic faux-pas, but choice words, designed to 'keep women out of public life and to diminish their positions of leadership'. They find parallels in criticisms of women's participation in Syria, and the daily experience of women such as McWilliams in the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. Publically challenging these constructions is fundamental if we are to move the debate away from whether women should even take part in negotiations at all, to how high-level diplomacy can bring meaningful transformative change to post-conflict societies.

Category: Conflict, Gender, GJA, Opinion, Women

Tags: Gender, Kosovo, Mediation, Serbia, Women in Mediation

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